
The Cause of Urban Slang and its Effect on the Development of the Northern Sotho Lexicon*

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Abstract: Urban slang terminology is extensively used today by most indigenous communities when speaking various South African indigenous languages. This is usually the case with informal conversations where the type of language used is also regarded to be informal. There are many instances where slang terms are used, consciously or unconsciously, in the form of code-switching with the indigenous languages in formal speech or informal conversations. These urban slang terms are regarded by most of the South African indigenous communities as prestige terms, especially by the young generation. Just as English and Afrikaans terminologies which had tremendous influence on the vocabularies of the indigenous languages, urban slang terminology has great influence on the daily usage of the South African indigenous languages. Despite this pressure, Northern Sotho and other South African indigenous languages do not have officially recognized adoptives which are derived from slang terminology. This is due to the fact that most language authorities do not want to associate their standard languages with urban slang because of various reasons which include, *inter alia*, the conservative idea of associating urban slang with crime and juvenile delinquency. Despite the negative attitudes of most of the conservative language authorities who regard the loan words of urban slang origin to be "contaminating" the South African indigenous languages (such as Northern Sotho), this slang terminology is every day becoming more popular and seems to have come to stay rather than be removed from the language of the people. A considerable fraction of the vocabulary of Northern Sotho, for instance, is made up of words which can be regarded as "loan words" derived from urban slang, even though formally we are still refusing to accept them as part of the lexicon of official Northern Sotho.

Keywords: EUPHEMISM, FLYTAAL, INFERIOR DIALECT, INFERIOR LANGUAGE, MULTILINGUALISM, NORTHERN SOTHO LEXICON, PRESTIGE LANGUAGE, PRESTIGE TERMINOLOGY, SECRET TERMINOLOGY, TSOTSITAAL, URBAN SLANG, UNDERWORLD

Opsomming: Die oorsprong van stedelike sleng en die uitwerking daarvan op die ontwikkeling van die Noord-Sotholeksikon. Stedelike slengterminologie word tans wyd gebruik deur die meeste inheemse gemeenskappe wanneer hulle verskillende inheemse Suid-Afrikaanse tale praat. Dit is gewoonlik die geval met informele gesprekke waar die

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gebruikte tipe taal ook as informeel beskou word. Daar is baie gevalle waar slengterme, bewustelik of onbewustelik, gebruik word in die vorm van kodewisseling met die inheemse tale in formele spraak of informele gesprekke. Hierdie stedelike slengterme word as prestigeterme deur die meeste van die inheemse Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskappe, veral deur die jong generasie beskou. Net soos Engelse en Afrikaanse terminologieë wat groot invloed op die woordeskat van die inheemse tale gehad het, het stedelike slengterminologie 'n groot invloed op die daaglikse gebruik van die inheemse Suid-Afrikaanse tale. Ten spyte van hierdie druk het Noord-Sotho en ander inheemse Suid-Afrikaanse tale nie amptelik erkende leenwoorde wat van slengterminologie afgelei is nie. Dit is die gevolg van die feit dat die meeste taaloutoriteite nie hul standaardtale geassosieer wil hê met stedelike sleng nie, vanweë verskillende redes wat, onder andere, die konserwatiewe idee van die assosiasie van stedelike sleng met misdaad en jeugmisdaad insluit. Ten spyte van die negatiewe houdings van die meeste konserwatiewe taaloutoriteite wat die leenwoorde van stedelikeslengoorsprong beskou as "kontaminerend" vir die inheemse Suid-Afrikaanse tale (soos Noord-Sotho), word hierdie slengterminologie elke dag meer populêr en lyk dit of dit blywend is eerder as verwyderbaar uit die taal van die mense. 'n Aansienlike deel van die woordeskat van Noord-Sotho, byvoorbeeld, bestaan uit woorde wat beskou kan word as "leenwoorde" verkry uit stedelike sleng, alhoewel ons nog formeel weier om hulle as deel van die leksikon van offisiële Noord-Sotho te aanvaar.

Slutelwoorde: EUFEMISME, FLAAITAAL, ONDERGESKIKTE DIALEK, ONDERGESKIKTE TAAL, MEERTALIGHEID, NOORD-SOTHOLEKSIKON, PRESTIGETAAL, PRESTIGETERMINOLOGIE, GEHEIME TERMINOLOGIE, TSOTSITAAL, STEDELIKE SLENG, ONDERWÊRELD

1. Introduction

This paper focuses attention on the reasons why urban slang terminology is not only commonly used among the Northern Sotho communities, but is every day becoming more popular, especially among the young generation. The second and main objective of this paper is to highlight some of the major consequences resulting from the use of urban slang terminology in the development of the vocabulary in Northern Sotho. Even though there are many works which have already been published dealing with slang, very few of these deal with the effects of slang on the vocabulary of the South African indigenous languages, especially the use of slang in Northern Sotho.

The few scholars who contributed research works in this field include people such as De Klerk (1991), Bailey (1985), Coertze (1969) and Mfusi (1992). Mfusi gives an excellent analysis of urban slang spoken in the area of Soweto and Johannesburg from the Zulu point of view. He explains the status, the origin and the importance of urban slang among the urban Zulu-speaking communities, e.g. the youth, tsotsis, etc., but does not show how the vocabulary of other African languages, such as Northern Sotho, are also affected. Coertze investigates the impact of the use of urban slang in the area around Pretoria, especially in the township of Atteridgeville. This research is based on the tra-

ditional township slang, e.g. "flytaal" (as he calls it), which is dominated by Afrikaans, in the area where Tswana is predominant. Just like that of Mfusi, Coertze's research does not investigate the effect of the modern urban slang terminology which is used today in the form of code-mixing with the indigenous languages such as Northern Sotho, but deals with the terminology of the original so-called "tsotsitaal" or "flytaal" which was dominant in the early fifties and sixties in the PWV (Pretoria, Witwatersrand and Vereeniging) area. Other writers, such as De Klerk (1991) and Bailey (1985), researched on slang pertaining to English usage in general.

Some of the major factors which influence the development of urban slang among the Northern Sotho people include the following: multilingualism, prestige and recognition, brevity and conciseness, euphemism and disguise. These factors are usually associated with a desire by the South African indigenous communities to acquire a knowledge of the two status languages, i.e. English and Afrikaans. This desire for knowledge of English and Afrikaans is usually coupled with prestige as well as factors such as secrecy and euphemism, which some scholars, such as Mfusi (1992: 57), refer to as "lexical avoidance".

2.1 Multilingualism

Slang develops in a contact situation where two or more languages, usually of different status, are spoken, i.e. in a multilingual society. According to Mansour (1980: 250), multilingualism covers two distinct phenomena, i.e. (a) the co-existence and close contact of several languages within a given community where, owing to the nature of community life, a special pattern of language use needs to be adopted; and (b) the co-existence of several ethnolinguistic entities within the boundaries of a state, with each entity occupying a relatively well-defined territory. In situations such as these, most speakers of the so-called "inferior languages" have a desire to know the prestige languages, such as English and Afrikaans, and start imitating them using the little knowledge of the vocabulary and pronunciation they have already acquired, which in most instances amounts to a mixture of vocabulary and structures of the indigenous languages and those of the prestige languages in order to forge understanding.

The urban community in the metropolitan areas of South Africa is a good example of a multilingual society. Besides the existence of the two "prestige languages" which used to be official languages in the Republic of South Africa, i.e. Afrikaans and English, the other indigenous languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, Southern Sotho, Venda, Tsonga and Ndebele exist in the same proximity, and this resulted in the creation of a "mixed society" which required a "mixed variety" (such as slang) to act as *lingua franca* to simplify communication between several peoples of different linguistic backgrounds. Mfusi (1992: 53) confirms this as follows with regard to the situation in Soweto:

In a heterogeneous urban community such as Soweto's, the majority of the

population speaks several languages. In almost all cases the knowledge of English and/or Afrikaans is indispensable for the acquisition of any type of employment. Actually, historical conditions in South Africa interrupted a natural extension of the functional range of local languages. With the institutional pattern, imposed by the colonial powers, arose the need to employ European languages not only in the role of languages of wider communication, but also as official languages.

As a result of multilingualism in the metropolitan areas of South Africa, especially the PWV, the people from various linguistic backgrounds felt a need to communicate in a sort of *lingua franca* variety which is understood by most people without prior formal instruction. As a "register" incorporating vocabularies from different languages, slang seemed to be an appropriate *lingua franca* for the urban indigenous communities, especially the youth. In most cases slang uses most of the known terminology from different languages in a form of metaphor which makes it easily understood without prior instruction in these "languages".

2.2 Prestige and Recognition

Prestige seems to be among some of the most important reasons for the development of slang among the youth. For instance, the development of *tsotsitaal* among the urban youth may be ascribed to their desire for communication in the prestige languages. Lack of sufficient knowledge of these languages resulted in the youth mixing the vocabulary and structures of these languages with their own vernaculars, which ultimately led to the development of a "language" which is neither English nor Afrikaans, nor any of the indigenous languages, but a different variety of mixed languages commonly known as "*tsotsitaal*" or "*flytaal*". In theory, slang varieties such as *tsotsitaal* seem to be of a low standard, especially when considering facts such as the following: (a) their lack of orthographies, (b) their habit of continuous and rapid change of terminology, (c) their association with juveniles, as well as (d) their association with the criminal elements in society. Nevertheless, in spite of all these factors, the prevailing situation is one in which these varieties are highly regarded by most of the young generation in our country, and for them the ability to speak *tsotsitaal* does not only signify a sense of belonging to a group of *clevas* (clever people), but also a realisation of having a high social status. The prestige of urban slang is explained by Mfusi (1992: 60) as follows with reference to Soweto Zulu slang:

Soweto Zulu slang holds a special position of prestige which derives from its use in music and political circles. Actually, it has become quite prestigious for the youth to use this code as it identifies them as Sowetan. People from Soweto are regarded with awe by Blacks from other parts of South Africa, and are also considered as trend-setters in fashion and also in the liberation struggle.

The prestige of flytaal is derived from its association with the metropolitan areas in South Africa since it originated in these urban environments. Most urban youth use urban slang terminology in their conversation in order to distinguish themselves from the rural youth, whom they regard as *moggos* (morons). In turn, the rural youth also want to be associated with the urban life by learning to use urban slang terminology in their communication so that they may not be regarded as *moggos*. As such, a knowledge of the so-called "lingo" (which is another synonym for "flytaal") is enough to elevate one to a status of *clevas*, *majitas*, *bras*, *motsiengs* or *mncas*, which are some of the tsotsi names for "clever people" or "tsotsis". To speak a refined standard vernacular without the inclusion of slang terms is today regarded by the youth as a sign of stupidity, and as such, a person who does not seem to have a knowledge of their lingo is referred to as *barri*, *spaza*, *moggo* or *kgashu* (which are terms for "stupid" or "a stupid person"). Code-mixing with urban slang terminology is today used in South Africa by many rural youths speaking different indigenous languages. In this way, the use of urban slang terminology helps one to be recognized as belonging to the "advanced" group, and that is why every teenager (rural or urban) strives to know this type of terminology as a means of identification or association with the urban environment. With regard to how they learn this terminology, De Klerk (1991: 81) says the following:

No one teaches these words, they must be picked up by careful observation, and used carefully and coolly. Asking about what they mean would be tantamount to admitting failure as a teenager.

The Northern Sotho youth can in this regard be divided into two categories, i.e. those who practically stay or belong in the metropolitan areas, and those who reside in the rural areas in Leboa (the North). Almost all of the Northern Sotho youth who live in the PWV speak a vernacular (Northern Sotho) which, besides terminology from Afrikaans and English, is rich in urban slang vocabulary. A considerable number of the young generation whose lives are still entirely restricted to the rural areas still use a refined standard Northern Sotho which is free of slang terminology, especially the female youth, while the majority of the rural youth, especially the male youth, try to imitate the urban youth in order to be recognized as belonging to a group of a "sophisticated" young generation.

2.3 Disguise and Euphemism

Another reason which leads to the use of slang is to disguise or conceal information which the speakers do not want other people to know. For this reason, the speakers sometimes use a special vocabulary which is solely intelligible to them. With regard to South African urban slang, the need to disguise and conceal information became necessary, especially with tsotsitaal, after the tsotsis "turned to robbery, mugging and other violent crimes" (Coplan 1985: 162). To-

day, *tsotsis* are associated with criminal activities such as theft, robbery, rape and drug-dealing, which are punishable by law, and therefore, secrecy is one of the major objectives when using their "language" to avoid imprisonment. Disguise is usually a primary reason why in most cases slang terminology changes all the time, or in some cases there are many terms referring to one concept. This is due to the fact that a secret term is only secret for some time before it is known by other people, which obviously forces the users of the term to find another secret term for the same concept to keep the secrecy. This is mostly the case with all the illegal or unlawful activities which might lead to the speakers being arrested if the concealed information should reach the authorities. For instance, the following terms either refer to marijuana or are marijuana-related concepts: *maruana*, *mingus*, *gantja*, *the holy herb*, *dabas*, *giggle sticks*, *greens*, *majat*, *tarries*, *zol*, *boppa*, *moshwang*, *fasa-nkhola*, etc. Anderson and Trudgill (1990: 79) say the following in this regard:

It has been said that one function of the language of thieves and drug addicts is to keep the content of their conversations secret — outsiders should not understand what is being said. This is sometimes called anti-language. Since, however, most of the words they use are not at all hard to understand, this claim is dubious. However, there are other ways to keep outsiders outside. A member of the narcotics police has informed us that the language of drug addicts changes rapidly, which makes it very hard for the police to train informers for infiltration into these groups. It is easy to learn the slang words, but it is hard to keep up to date and use and combine words correctly. In this way it is easy for the group members to tell who is a true member of the group.

Besides disguise, slang is also used in the form of euphemism. This is usually the case when the speaker prefers to use slang terms to avoid using standard indigenous lexical items which may not only be associated with the harsh and unpleasant reality of the meaning of the terms but also, according to Stern (1931: 331), "have numerous undesirable associations with the offensive things, and mean exactly what they mean".

As such, most of the words relating to things such as the embarrassing consequences of overindulgence in drinking, and the embarrassing and indecent indigenous terms relating to sexual organs and sexual activities are replaced by decent slang terms. This amelioration of indecent terminology resulted in the creation of many lexical items originating from slang, which are used by most Northern Sotho people. Even though most of such words are still not yet adopted as loan words in the Northern Sotho vocabulary, most people prefer to use them instead of their counterparts which are regarded as Northern Sotho standard terms. For instance, people prefer to use the term *spotso* instead of *bjaleng*, which has an additional connotation of "stupefying drunkenness" in it. The term *tsheri* is more prestigious and less offensive than the standard Northern Sotho words *nyatse*, *motlabo* or *mokaola* which all mean "girl-friend" and which are not as decent as the former. This is the case with well-

known slang terms such as *jola*, *pholaka*, *skebereshe*, *maruana*, etc. as is demonstrated in the following sentences:

Mosadi yo ke skebereshe instead of *Mosadi yo ke kwababane/nkwahla/sefefe*
(This lady is morally weak)

Tate o pholakile instead of *Tate o tagilwe*
(Father is half-drunk)

Simon o jola le Queen instead of *Simon o nyatselane/kaolane le Queen*
(Simon has a love affair with Queen)

Ditsotsi di tsuba maruana instead of *Ditsotsi di tsuba patše*
(Tsotsis smoke dagga)

Tate o ile spotsong instead of *Tate o ile bjaleng*
(Father went to a shebeen)

3. The Effect of Slang on the Vocabulary of Northern Sotho

The use of urban slang has both negative and positive consequences on the development of the vocabulary of standard languages. The negative influence is associated with the so-called "contamination" of the vocabulary of standard languages. The "purity" of the language (Northern Sotho) is destroyed by the use of many words from foreign nonstandardized "registers", i.e. urban slang such as *flytaal*, which, it is feared, might reduce our language to the status of a mere street or gangster language. For this reason, we try to protect the vocabularies of our languages by discouraging the use of these "registers" by our people, and all the time encouraging formal use of the standard language. In his article, Swanepoel (1978) advances the "purist" idea of protecting our standard languages by criticizing the role of urban slang as it is used in the urban communities. He (Swanepoel 1978: 8) says:

Many readers of this article will immediately remark: "o yes that is the so called 'tsotsi' language of some youngsters in our towns". Who of us will not recognize these common terms?: "notch", "cherry", "groove", "mca", "smack", "dribble", "bra", etc. My answer to these people is that this type of language is used so commonly today that it has found its way right into the compositions and other written work. I want to stress another important point: The use of this type of language does not indicate any form of language ability, on the contrary this displays poor taste and exactly the opposite of what the user had in mind.

Unfortunately, we are fighting a losing battle since the use of slang terminology within our languages grows at an alarming pace. This type of terminology is used not only by the youth in high schools and tertiary institutions, but also by some of the teachers, academics, doctors, language specialists and many people whom we regard as professionals and custodians of the "purity" of the stan-

dard languages. These people think of standard language only when they want to be formal to suit formal situations. When conversing with friends outside these formal situations (conversations which take almost 70% of their talking time), they switch over to a variety which is dominated by slang terminology. In this way, slang terminology today has rendered most standard words into disuse, and these standard terms become decorations in our dictionaries, while in practice they are not used. The following slang terms are examples in this regard:

baiza (*paeza*) instead of *gakanega* (to be puzzled/to be confused), e.g.
O a paeza ge a bona basetsana instead of *O a gakanega ge a bona basetsana*
 (He is easily confused when he sees girls)

jojo instead of *tsogo-le-kobong* (kickback), e.g.
O amogetše jojo instead of *O amogetše tsogo-le-kobong*
 (He has received a kickback)

tšheri instead of *nyatse* (girlfriend/mistress), e.g.
Ke tšheri ya ka instead of *Ke nyatse ya ka*
 (She is my girlfriend)

diza instead of *go fa dipute* (give presents/money to a girlfriend/fiancée), e.g.
Tšhelete ya gagwe e fetšwa ke go diza instead of *Tšhelete ya gagwe e fetšwa ke go fana ka dipute*
 (He wastes his money by giving it to girlfriends)

This shows that the positive consequence of urban slang can be said to be related to the increase in the vocabulary of languages. Even though the "purists" are concerned about the status of the standard languages, in the South African indigenous languages such as Northern Sotho, slang has contributed more to the expansion of their lexicon than the damage it has done. Even though most of the terms which are derived from slang are still excluded from our orthographies, the fact that these words are used more than their indigenous counterparts means that they are here to stay, and it will not be possible for the "purists" to remove them from the language of the people. The sooner lexicographers start recording these terms either in the standard dictionaries of the indigenous languages or in the specialized dictionaries dealing with loan words from urban slang, the better for the positive development of these languages.

4. Conclusion

It is obvious that our indigenous languages do need the terminology which is made available by urban slang to enrich their own vocabulary. This need is

demonstrated by the number of slang terms our people are using and the number of standard terms they are neglecting in their daily informal and formal communications. If some of these slang terms can be adopted as loan words in the vocabulary of the indigenous languages, such as Northern Sotho, these languages will be enriched by the new terms which are favoured and used by the people, thereby bridging the gap between the written and the spoken language. Of equal importance is the compilation of special dictionaries for these slang terms which will remain as treasuries for the future of our languages. This means that there is still a lot of research awaiting lexicographers of the South African indigenous languages with regard to the structuring of the slang lexicon in these languages.

Glossary

The following miniglossary shows a few examples of the slang terms commonly used in Northern Sotho by most of the urban and rural youth:

<i>Baizane</i>	A type of white-coloured fowl
<i>Bari (Baru)</i>	Stupid
<i>Blasa</i>	Play music/Drink liquor
<i>Blind (Blaend)</i>	Bad/Too much
<i>Bloma</i>	Sit/Stay
<i>Bombai</i>	An imitation (which is not up to standard)
<i>Bra</i>	Friend/ <i>Tsotsi</i> /Brother
<i>Daesa</i>	Sell
<i>Des</i>	Nice/Beautiful
<i>Dladleni</i>	Home
<i>Fasa</i>	Propose love to a girl/To be with a girlfriend
<i>Flopa</i>	Fail
<i>Jampas (Jumpers)</i>	At night/In the evening
<i>Jiwish</i>	Attire/Clothes
<i>Josi</i>	Johannesburg
<i>Juba</i>	Boyfriend
<i>Juleiti</i>	Work/Employment
<i>Khawada</i>	Disappoint/Terrorize
<i>Kuza</i>	Money
<i>Laiti</i>	Young boy
<i>Lani</i>	White man/lady
<i>Lethaima (Timer)</i>	Father
<i>Magegamba</i>	Money
<i>Mazuma (Mazumba)</i>	Money
<i>Ncanda</i>	Take
<i>Ngamola</i>	Tycoon/White man
<i>Skele</i>	School

<i>Smeka</i>	Money
<i>Smoko</i>	Trouble
<i>Spane</i>	Work/Employment
<i>Squeza</i>	Sister-/Brother-in-law
<i>Squila</i>	Refuse
<i>Stalala</i>	Johannesburg
<i>Topi</i>	Father
<i>Vaya</i>	Go/Leave
<i>Zak</i>	Money
<i>Zwakala</i>	Come

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